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ABSTRACT

The study of language--whether it is called grammar or linguistics--deserves a place in the composition course. This journal article suggests that there are better methods of teaching language lessons than the negative, error-correction and error-avoidance methods that still prevail. The study of grammar may be characterized as a means to bringing to a conscious level the system of language that students already know subconsciously as native speakers. One way to help students recognize and appreciate their native expertise is by introducing the topic of sentence rhythm. It will come as no surprise to the students that their rhythm patterns convey information, that the way they say their words, the way they emphasize them, or create valleys and peaks of emphasis, affects their meaning. For instance, beginning a sentence with "it is" or "there are" shifts the emphasis to words that might have appeared earlier in the sentence and therefore would not have received as much emphasis since emphasis usually falls to the object rather than the subject. Another aspect of rhythm that is ignored is punctuation--punctuation rules are usually discussed only in terms of error correction. The lowly comma for example, can control rhythm and focus when well-placed. Raising the students' consciousness about the structure of their language helps them: recognize the miraculous nature of language; appreciate how much they know when they know language; and understand the tools of the writer's craft. (TB)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Sentence Focus and Sentence Rhythm: Connecting Linguistics to Composition

Martha Kolln

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The study of language—whether you call it grammar or linguistics—deserves a place in the composition course. For many composition teachers, that statement constitutes an arguable proposition. And the sad fact is that some teachers—many, I'm afraid—take the position that grammar has no place—a position, unfortunately, shared by the leadership of NCTE.

This negative position took on new life in 1963, when the words "harmful effect on the improvement of writing" were applied to the teaching of formal grammar in the NCTE report *Research in Written Composition*.[1] And because of that statement, the concepts of modern linguistics, many of which we have been privy to for over 50 years, have been kept out of the classroom. The grammar that does get taught—both in the elementary grades and in basic writing courses in college—continues to be mired in the outdated and discredited eight-parts-of-speech Latinate grammar of old. The descriptions of language that are included in handbooks and rhetorics for our composition classrooms today are pre-Chomsky, even pre-Bloomfield. Pre-modern linguistics.

Whether the language lessons are being taught in the composition class or in the "formal grammar" class (and, yes, they do continue to be taught, in spite of NCTE's official pronouncements), there are better ways of teaching them and better reasons for teaching them than the negative, error-correction and error-avoidance methods that still prevail. If grammar knowledge doesn't appear to improve writing ability—and that's what researchers continue to claim—it's because that knowledge hasn't been applied in a positive, rhetorical way.

I like to characterize the study of grammar as the process of bringing to a conscious level the system of language that we know, and that our students know, subconsciously as native speakers. One way to help our students recognize and appreciate their native expertise is by introducing the topic of sentence rhythm. And I want to emphasize that the nonnative speakers in our classes—students with no native expertise in English—can profit equally well from this kind of consciousness raising.

Both language expertise and the importance of rhythm are easy to demonstrate in speech. Here's a simple classroom exercise. Have your students come up with the next sentence—after you say—

Joe didn't bake the cake, he . . . . .
Joe didn't bake the cake, he . . . . .
Joe didn't bake the cake, ...

And if you're looking for an explanation or a demonstration of what is meant by reader—or listener—expectation, what could be clearer? Those three sentences obviously stimulate different expectations.

It will come as no surprise to your students that their rhythm patterns convey information, that the way they say their words makes a difference in meaning. We all know that.

Doesn't it follow, then, that it also makes a difference in the way written words are read? Won't readers also come up with a variety of meanings, depending on their reading, on the rhythm pattern they apply? Clearly the answer is yes.

So who should be in charge of the way the reader reads? When I write, I want to be in charge—just as I am when I speak. I want the reader to understand my intentions—to get the message that I intended to send.

The big difference between speaking and writing, of course, is consciousness. What speakers do in terms of sentence structure, they do, for the most part, subconsciously. Writing, on the other hand, is a conscious, and consciously learned, activity.

The poverty of our textbooks

One of the handicaps that classroom teachers face in teaching linguistic principles is the absence of information in their textbooks. For example, one of the most practical contributions made by modern linguistics to composition is that of "functional sentence perspective." Our own 3C's journal has published articles on this topic as far back as 1981.[2] But the topic has yet to be included in our handbooks and rhetorics for college composition classes. (And I have recently examined over a dozen new editions.)

What do we mean by Functional Sentence Perspective? One of its practical aspects is the idea of given and new information. Most of the time a sentence will contain both new information—the reason for the sentence—as well as old information—information already known to the reader.

In a coherent paragraph, every sentence after the opening one will generally include known information. That known information commonly fills the subject slot. The new information—the real purpose of the sentence—generally comes in the predicate.

This known-new sequence is so pervasive a feature of prose that it has come to be called a contract: the known-new, or given-new, contract. The writer has an obligation, a contract of sorts, to fulfill expectations in the reader and keep the reader on familiar ground by connecting each sentence in some way to what has gone before. And this feature of sentences, I should add, is clearly our strongest cohesive device.

Consider, for example, how often the subject slot is filled by a pronoun; that pronoun, of course, stands for an antecedent that is known to the reader, a previously mentioned noun or other nominal structure. When readers see a personal or demonstrative or relative pronoun, they have a right to assume a known antecedent. But when

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that antecedent is missing or vague, the pronoun ceases to be known information. The vague use of pronouns, especially *this* and *that*, which we sometimes find in our students' papers, is actually, then, an instance of breaking the known-new contract.

So where does rhythm fit into the picture? The normal rhythm pattern of English, the intonation pattern, is a series of valleys and peaks, with the loudest syllables, those with strong stress, represented by the peaks. Not all the peaks are of the same height—we have different degrees of stress—but they do tend to come at fairly regular intervals. And where would you expect to hear the loudest stress, the highest peak? On the new information. And where is that likely to be? Towards the end of the sentence, in the predicate, a rhythm pattern called end-focus. The subject, being known information, is likely to be a valley in the rhythm pattern, rather than a peak.

Most of us encourage our students to read their papers aloud. But do we teach them what to listen for? Writers who are tuned in to the valleys and peaks of rhythm will listen to make sure that the new information comes at a natural peak. You'll discover, too, that often the awkwardness you can't quite put your finger on is the result of that broken contract.

But we all know that English is a versatile language. Obviously every sentence isn't the same. The rhythm pattern varies; the known-new pattern varies. We have options. I think of those options for sentence variation as my tool kit. Both writers and speakers of English have lots of tools. As speakers, we know and use them subconsciously.

We know that a speaker can say,

Joe baked the cake,

or

Yesterday Joe baked the cake.

But ff the writer isn't sure how the reader will emphasize the sentence—if the context doesn't provide a clue—the writer might use a syntactic clue by writing,

It was the cake that Joe baked.

or

It was yesterday that Joe baked the cake.

The *it* structure guarantees that the reader will put the main stress where the writer wants it put.

Another handy-dandy tool for changing rhythm is the *there*-transformation:

There's a chocolate cake for dessert.

Remember that the normal subject position, the opening slot in the sentence, is usually an unstressed valley in the rhythm pattern. The addition of the expletive *there* delays the subject, putting it in line for a peak of stress. The expletive *there* may also enable the speaker or writer to introduce a new topic in a sentence that may not include any known information.

Unfortunately these uses of *it* sentences and *there* sentences—these tools for the writer—are rarely taught. In fact, the opposite is true: They are more likely to be untaught, to be discouraged, condemned as empty phrases or excessive words. In most rhetorics and handbooks they are labeled "wordy" or "fat" (as opposed to "concise" and "lean"). I've also found that examples are invariably given with no context—as if context made no difference. In one new rhetoric, a heading has this advice: "Cut out every word you don't absolutely need." (It occurs to me that this heading doesn't absolutely need the word *absolutely*!) Another text claims seriously that these two sentences mean the same thing:

It is entirely possible that the lake is frozen.
The lake may be frozen.

And since they mean the same thing, obviously the one with fewer words and a simpler construction is deemed the better choice.

This kind of advice is endemic in our rhetorics and handbooks: The more concise, the better.

Nonsenical advice about the passive voice

Even the advice the students are given about preferring the active voice rather than passive is commonly based on a concern about wordiness. Listen to this advice included in the teacher's edition of a recent rhetoric—advice for the teacher under the heading "Eliminating Passive Constructions.":

> In passive voice constructions, the verb is usually flanked by both an auxiliary verb and a preposition. These words clutter the sentence and tend to bury its strong verb—thereby sapping the life from the writing.

I want you to notice two things about that advice: First, it's written in the passive voice. Second, it is utter nonsense!

Wordiness has nothing whatsoever to do with the choice of the passive. Nothing. Long ago linguists pointed out the purpose of the passive from the standpoint of functional sentence perspective. Think about the known and new information. Think about the rhythm pattern.

Consider, for example, what happens when the known element is not the subject. What if the known element is in the object of the verb, say—and the new information the subject? In other words, a reversal of the usual known-new sequence. How do we get the reader to put the stress on the new information? In speech, as we've heard, there's no problem: We can say "Joe baked the cake." How do we get a reader to put the stress on *Joe*? Remember that the subject is generally a valley, not a peak. We've seen one solution:

It was Joe who baked the cake.

Another is to put the passive voice into play. The passive enables the writer to "front" the direct object—that is, to put it in subject position, the position of known information. And when we write, "The cake was baked by Joe," we have put Joe in the position of main stress. And here the old information, in subject position, acts as a connector to the previous sentence.

This purpose for the passive voice rarely makes it into our rhetorics and handbooks. Instead, we read nonsense like this:

> By focusing on the actor, the active voice usually helps readers visualize the action of a sentence. Active voice sentences usually use fewer words and have a more direct structure than passive voice sentences.

Like so many—if not all—such pronouncements, the advice to avoid the passive has no basis in reality, in actual writing. The authors of these textbooks certainly don't adhere to it themselves.

Of course it's easy for inexperienced writers to overuse all of these structures. And of course we should pay attention to that

overuse and help our students recognize it. But when passive sentences and *there* and *it* structures are well used, they are efficient in allowing the writer to direct the reader's focus. They help to put the writer in charge.

Another aspect of rhythm that we ignore is that of punctuation. I suspect our students view punctuation rules as necessary evils rather than as helpful tools. We discuss them only when we have to, in terms of error correction. As a result, our students don't recognize how powerful even the lowly comma can be. They are likely to connect commas to pauses. In fact, many of their punctuation errors can be attributed to that misunderstanding. A more useful observation is the relationship between commas and peaks of stress. To make sure that a reader will put strong stress on a word, the writer can look for a way to follow that word with a comma.

This advice, of course, doesn't mean that we simply toss in commas. But we do have many cohesive devices that can be set off by commas—devices that are movable. Look again at the first sentence in this paragraph. The inserted "of course" controls the rhythm pattern of that sentence. It's one of those handy movables. I could completely change the rhythm by moving "of course" to the end:

> This advice doesn't mean that we simply toss in commas, of course.

In the first version, the word ad*vice*, the subject, got all the attention; in the second, the attention is shifted to the last word, *commas*. Our language is loaded with movable parts that enable us to change the rhythm and focus of our sentences.

Bringing these kinds of language lessons into the composition class will benefit writers at all levels of ability After all, our job as writing teachers should be to raise our students' consciousness about the structure of their language, to help them recognize the miraculous nature of language, to appreciate how much they know when they know language, and certainly to help them understand the tools of the writer's craft.

Notes

1 For a critique of the "harmful effects" statement, see Kolln, "Closing the Books on Alchemy," *CCC* (May 1981), 139-151.

2 See, for example, articles in *CCC* by Dale Holloway (May 1981) and William J. Vande Kopple (February 1982).

Martha Kolln, president of the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, retired last year from Penn State. The second edition of her textbook, *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*, was just published by Allyn & Bacon with a 1996 copyright date.